



Update

Managing High Conflict Personalities in Mediation

By Cheryl Cohen, Jack Mahler, and Gwen Jones

High Conflict Personality: *Usually someone with the traits of a Cluster B Personality Disorder listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association – presently the DSM-IV. The Cluster B personality disorders are: Borderline, Narcissistic, Antisocial and Histrionic. The people diagnosed with these four disorders are known for their frequent and dramatic interpersonal conflicts and crises. Their personality characteristics often bring them into disputes which involve many others to resolve – including the courts.*

At the workshop on High Conflict Personalities in June, we had an opportunity to meet William Eddy, the presenter, who is a very easy going, sociable guy. He is the author of several books including High Conflict People in legal disputes, (available in our mediation office) which is very helpful and easy to read. It explains the dynamics of working with high conflict people and offers useful advice. Some of his other books include Splitting: Protecting Yourself while Divorcing a Borderline or Narcissist and his latest one: Its All your Fault. 12 Tips for Managing People who blame others for everything. (What a title!)

Bill started his career as a Clinical Social Worker and found that personality disorders were common in his work with individuals and couples, and that as a mental health professional he needed both assessment and treatment tools. He then decided to change careers and go to Law School. As a lawyer, his caseload was primarily family divorces and he recognized a pattern of personality disorders in many clients. He was familiar with how to handle high emotions but he realized that most attorneys and court systems were not. He was drawn to mediation in 1975 when he began volunteering in the community handling a wide variety of disputes. He found that mediation combined all of his interests and skills and he became passionate about the process. In addition, he started writing articles and teaching courses on negotiation and mediation, including classes on dealing with potentially difficult clients and personality disorders. He is currently a family mediator in San Diego. He continues to write books about high conflict personalities. On a personal note, Bill is mar-



William Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

ried to a social worker whom he met in Seattle while he was a musician in a band. He is an avid hiker and mountain climber and is a social activist.

The workshop given by Bill Eddy focused on challenges in working with high conflict personalities. He began by discussing Axis II Personality Disorders (from the DSM-IV). All have common issues of lack of self-awareness and difficulty in adaptation. The four Cluster B personality disorders are: Borderline “Love you, hate you,” Narcissistic “I’m very superior,” Histrionic “Always dramatic,” and Antisocial “Con-

artists.” Some people who do not have a full personality disorder may have maladaptive personality “traits.” Bill stressed that it is not a good idea to try and diagnose people with these disorders, or to tell them that they have a disorder. Instead, just recognize potential patterns and adapt your approach accordingly. Also, there is no need to diagnose traits versus full-blown disorders, because the same issues and questions apply to both.

He listed seven techniques for working with clients who are high conflict people:

- When they feel anger, empathize with them.
- When they feel fear, reassure them. (Don’t ask them to make themselves more vulnerable.)
- When feelings are really stuck, focus on a task.
- When you feel like pushing, relax and back off.
- When you feel hopeless, reach out to the team.
- When you are in conflict, respect other’s view.
- When you feel impasse, let go of outcome.

Some other tips from Bill for working with high conflict people in mediation include the following: Don’t rush them, because they get exhausted. Use E.A.R.

(empathy, attention, respect). Have clients make process decisions by asking if they are ready to move on. For example, “Are you ready to make a list?” Ask “What do you think about that?” rather than “How do you feel about that?” to avoid opening up emotions. Avoid pressing them for agreement. Let them decide if things are working for them by checking in and asking “Is this working for you?” If they threaten to leave, suggest taking a five minute break, and follow with private meetings. Watch out for “splitting” – group members taking sides, not working together.

The most important thing to remember when working with high conflict people is that everything is about relationships for them, not about issues. Their behavior is mostly unconscious. They push professional boundaries out of desperation, not out of intent to be difficult. Direct confrontation brings resistance and escalation of blame, not insight for them. But there is hope. Most of them have problem-solving skills that can be accessed if you can calm their emotions.